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Speech on the Bill to
call a convention
Harris.

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S P E E C H
OF
WILLIAM S. HARRIS,
OF CABARRUS,

*Delivered in the House of Commons, in the Committee of the
Whole, on the Bill to call a Convention, January 11, 1861.*

I understand, Mr. Chairman, the original bill reported from the Committee on Federal Relations, the Resolutions of the Minority of that Committee, offered by the gentleman from Alamance, (Mr. Mebane,) and the substitute introduced by the gentleman from New Hanover, (Mr. Person,) to be the subject-matter under discussion. Without trespassing upon the time of the House, I desire to submit, briefly, some views which I entertain on this all-absorbing subject. The issue of the crisis that now looms up before the country is unspeakably momentous, and it becomes the obvious duty of every representative in this Legislature, as well as every citizen of the State, to address his mind and earnest thoughts, to some practical plan of solving this amazing problem. I promise the House, Sir, that what I have to say in taking my position on this question, shall be uttered in few but earnest words. I announce in my place here, Sir, that it is my settled purpose to act with the view to an adjustment of this exciting and angry controversy, now and forever. Henceforward I desire to keep no word of promise to our ear that shall be broken to our hope. But I believe, Sir, "that peace hath its triumphs no less than war," and in that spirit I have sought fairly to try and to exhaust every constitutional remedy before the Old North State should be precipitated

upon the thick bosses of revolution and disunion. Although my hopes of the perpetuity of the Union of these States, amid the discordant elements that now cluster around it, have declined, yet those which remain are like the lessening leaves of the Sybil, still cherished and increased in value.

When truth and justice permit, I am disposed to look on the bright side of human affairs; and in illustration of this peculiar feeling, I remember an interesting incident which is said to have occurred in the darkest period of the revolution, after the defeat of Gen. Gates, at Camden, S. C., when Gen. Greene took command of the army of the South. As the story goes, a hopeful and gallant soldier of Scotch ancestry, in the western part of South Carolina, was noticed by Gen. Greene, near his marquee, on a cold frosty morning, treading his way through snow and ice, leaving his tracks stained with the blood that flowed from his bare feet. That distinguished and compassionate General kindly accosted him and remarked :

“My poor fellow, I am sorry for you.”

The bright faced, but suffering soldier, pleased with the notice and sympathy of his General, cheerily replied, “I dinna ken, Ginerall, they tell me we gwine have a fight 'fore long, and then I'll git a pair o' shoes.”

The extremity of hope in the present crisis is not much unlike that of the humble, but true-hearted soldier. The fight in that contest was for liberty, the fight in the present contest is over the body and being of the Republic, whose foundations were then laid and cemented in the blood of the noblest band of patriots the world ever knew. And if this issue cannot be prevented or adjusted, this experiment of self-government will have ended, before the last soldiers of the revolution shall have gone to their long sleep in the grave. But, however melancholy as to them in the brief period of their remaining pilgrimage, the terrible consequences of this catastrophe must fall chiefly on us, who are actors upon the stage, in the day and generation in which we live—actors for ourselves and those who are to come after us. In this view, Sir, it becomes the most overwhelmingly important inquiry that can possibly occur to any rational mind : How can this state of things be prevented or arrested? Is there no hope that we may yet be spared this

gloomy voyage in a broken and dismantled Ship of State upon what is, doubtless, so far as human vision can foresee, a "shoreless, sailless, waveless, tideless ocean?"

The government was formed in a spirit of compromise. The old articles of confederation, when they were found to be but a rope of sand, gave way to the more perfect form of government under the constitution, and its provisions were then deemed ample for our protection. But Massachusetts had then not long ceased to burn witches and to advertise runaway negroes, crimes which she doubtless places upon her calendar of the present day as of equal turpitude. Appropriate, Sir, at this point in what I have to say, I beg leave to read from an old newspaper, an instructive relic of other days, which I happen to have in my possession, entitled the "*Boston Post Boy and Advertiser*," published in Boston, and dated December 12, 1763, little less than one hundred years ago. In it I find this singular advertisement:

"To be sold, a Strong Active and Healthy Negro Fellow, about 17 Years old, fit for Town or Country Employment. Enquire of the Printers."

Does not this show what a wondrous change has come over the spirit of Massachusetts's dreams? Under the severe suffering of the present time, it is possible, though not probable, that her returning reason may yet doom to just vengeance the necromancers of wicked and terrible mischief, her Wilsons, and Garisons, and Sumners, and Phillipses. Extremes of folly and justice in the history of nations sometimes meet. The spirit that gave Robespierre triumph, gave Robespierre death. When the final hour of retribution comes, from deceived and down-trodden humanity, short indeed ever has been the journey of false philanthropists or fools from the prison to the grave.

The admitted dangers that now surround our institutions should prompt us all to unite on a common platform and exhaust the last constitutional remedy. But, Sir, I am not wedded to any particular plan. I will stand on any platform that looks to permanent and honorable adjustment. I hesitate not to declare that I am utterly opposed to separate secession, and still greatly prefer the plan indicated by the resolutions which I had the honor to introduce early in the session, and now embodied in the resolutions offered by the gentleman from Alamance. They contemplate a Convention of all the States with a view to re-

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dress and re-construction in accordance with the 5th Article of the Constitution of the United States. I know that it is alleged that two-thirds of the States will not apply, and, therefore, that is not now practicable, but, Sir, it is written in the Constitution of the country and ought to be spoken out with the spirit of freemen.

And then, Sir, if all these steps fail to save the Union of the States, the cause of our section, unprejudiced by premature action, and capable of the noblest defences, will stand justified before God and the world. Is it too late to try this remedy? Perhaps it may be, but South Carolina is conservative and well-ordered in her State Government, and now has the power to halt for counsel and co-operation, as well as the undoubted courage to do and to dare. But, Sir, in the event it should not be the pleasure of this Legislature to call for a National Convention, I announce my purpose to vote for a Convention of the people, in order to place North Carolina in a condition to co-operate with her Southern sister States, and in that form interpose her cautious wisdom to avert the unnatural struggle. If you fail now to exert the conservative power of North Carolina, and a collision of arms should ensue, the natural sympathy of your people will make them flock to the Palmetto Standard with the swiftness of the warhorse to battle. Nor will they be intimidated, Sir, by the declaration that South Carolina will be overcome in the unequal strife. They know, Sir, that no people have ever been finally subjugated who had the sinews of war, who had the spirit of a just cause and bread to feed their armies. But admit, Sir, for a moment that South Carolina may be overcome, her fair fields desolated, her cities destroyed, her people conquered, will not the same hands that bind the yoke of sectional oppression upon her neck, fasten it upon your neck and upon the neck of every citizen of North Carolina? What, then, will be left for us, Sir, of national liberty, to live or to hope for? Nothing, Sir, save to reap, to our heart's content, "the oppressor's scorn and the proud man's contumely."

But, Sir, we are bound up in the same bundle of destiny by the evident ordination of an Eternal Providence, and committed by the constitution of the country to perform the duty, and

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to work out the amazing problem of the advancement of the white race, and the civilization of the black race under mild and humane institutions. The negro race is here placed in its true normal condition of regulated slavery. The Southern States cannot occupy any neutral ground in the face of an irrepressible conflict, which proclaims war, *ad internecionem*, against them, as the rightful arbiters and appointed guardians of an inferior race. History is philosophy, teaching by example, and its most instructive lesson tells, that in the drama of this world's affairs, the negro race acted no part, although it is coeval with our own in the ages of time, until letters patent were obtained from Charles V, by Las Casas, under which the slave trade was opened in 1517 on the western coast of Africa. Afterwards the cupidity of England, and at a still later period the avarice of Massachusetts Yankees, greatly enlarged it. The trade, thus opened, found the African, "like the barren heath in the desert, that knoweth not when good cometh," having roamed his native wilds a barbarian for four thousand years. Under its auspices he was transplanted to other lands, where his labor has been made to expand the commerce of the world, and the mild government of a superior race, enabled him to realize the highest and palmiest civilization which his nature or race has ever reached or known. England, at this day, with all her boasted systems of emancipation—all her boasted systems of apprenticeship to educate negroes to liberty, and notwithstanding all her boasted intentions of raising her own supply with free African labor on the Niger River, knows that the *Niger* will not do, but that the *Nigger* will do, on the American cotton fields, under American masters, to raise the great staple of cotton, which is now necessary to keep guant famine from her sea-girt isle, and maintain the permanence of her Throne. But, Sir, the demand for this great staple of Southern labor, amid the strife of contending States, and the blockade of your ports, will complicate your embarrassments and augment your difficulties. I stop not now to discuss this aspect of the subject. But in view of the magnitude of this question in all its bearings, I have desired earnestly to see this step taken to preserve constitutional liberty, to maintain the Union of the States, and then,

Sir, if found impossible, every citizen of our State would stand justified to his conscience, to his country, and to his God. I desired, too, Sir, to see a National Convention, with a view to enable the South, through her wisest statesmen, to lay down her ultimatum upon a national arena, and to assert the moral grandeur of her true position before the world, or to fall with her back to the field and her feet to the foe. But, Sir, it is my settled conviction, that in view of the movement now inaugurated North and South, this question must now be met and adjusted permanently and surely. It is true that some conservatives *overmuch* allege that Abram Lincoln's administration may be better and more conservative than Mr. Buchanan's. I acknowledge, Sir, that it could not be any worse in startling corruption and unparalleled perfidy.

But it is manifest, Sir, that the settlement of this question cannot now be put off any longer. In any other event that does not look to a re-construction of the government, the future elections for President, so far as fifteen States of the Union are concerned, will be a mere farce. Look at the result. The whole power and patronage of the government will be wielded to weld together the numerical force of eighteen States forever against us. Does not the ordinary rule of human action forbid the idea that Abram Lincoln, in this hour of triumph, would *back* down from the platform upon which he was elected?—Such a change, from wicked means to wicked ends, would be as sudden as that of the mighty Apostle on his journey to Damascus, and that, too, in an age when miracles had ceased to occur. Not more surely did the Emperors of Rome, backed by their Pretorian bands, in the worst periods of their history, dictate the succession, than would this Black Republican organization, headed by a successful Black Republican President, breathing threatenings and slaughter against our institutions, appoint, from term to term, his successor. The election of Lincoln is predicated upon a single idea, and that idea is the most stupendous falsehood of any age—that there is an “irrepressible conflict” between the hireling labor of the North and the slave labor of the South—that all the States must become either free or slave, when Abram Lincoln well knew that it was just as probable that the rice-fields of Carolina should be removed to Massachu-

setts, as that the institution of slavery, against the great law of climate, should go there.

I beg leave to read an extract from the declared views of Abram Lincoln, which I find in the message of the Governor of Virginia. Mr. Lincoln says:

"I embrace with pleasure this opportunity of declaring my disapprobation of that clause of the Constitution which denies to a portion of the colored people the right of suffrage."

Can any one doubt that it is the settled purpose, by the ultimate extinction of slavery, to place the white man and the negro on equal footing at the ballot-box? There is nothing, Sir, to equal this delusion in the history of any civilized people. The imposture of the false prophet, in a dark age, is not more surprising. There is no parallel to it, unless you look into the fictions of romance and find it in the Prophet of the Silver Veil; but even the deformity which it concealed is less hideous and revolting than that which is covered by the black veil of abolitionism.—And amid the earth-slides of disunion and the destruction of the government, Lincoln may say to his trained bands, as erst did the impostor in the story of the east:

"Behold your Light—your Star,
Ye would be dupes and victims, and ye are."

I believe, Mr. Chairman, that a dissolution of the Union will be a calamity to civilization and to humanity, and if it should occur, it is my settled conviction, that the only plan which would be conservative of safety and social order at home, and insure some degree of respect abroad, is the scheme of a united Southern Confederacy. Such a confederacy would be homogeneous in interests and institutions, and that condition alone would be a great element of power. I cannot entertain for a moment the idea of a Middle Confederacy, although it was so ably advocated on yesterday by the eloquent gentleman from Ashe, (Mr. Crumpler.) It would be impossible, Sir, for a Middle Confederacy to sustain the long lines of border on the North and on the South, with custom houses, and perhaps standing armies, without the complete impoverishment of all the people. And there would be added to all this disadvantage, the cross-fire of eternal hate from the North, while the heart of the South, now our natural ally, would soon be changed from fraternal confidence to vindictive rivalry and strife.

But the gentleman from Ashe argued that the slave trade would be re-opened. I would deprecate such a result, but the border States would be more likely to resist successfully such a policy, in a united Southern Confederacy, than in separate and independent governments. In the event there should be a Cotton Confederacy and a Middle Confederacy, is not the probability greatly increased that the interests of the South would prompt to re-open the slave trade? And yet, the border States could exert no moral power to control or avert it. With this view, then, Sir, I must set my face, as a flint, against the idea of a Middle Confederacy. In closing my remarks on this occasion, I desire, Sir, to return my sincere thanks to the House for its patient attention.

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